

PreventionAlert

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Good News: Ecstasy Going Down, but Prescription Drug Abuse Up



After increasing over half a decade, in 2002 teen use of the “club drug” ecstasy tumbled sharply. Twenty percent fewer high school seniors tried ecstasy in 2002 over the previous year. The declines were registered at middle school and high school age levels. They track a significant uptake in youth’s perception of the harm of ecstasy, which is responsible with other club drugs like GHB for hundreds of teen deaths over the past few years.

In fact, most illicit drugs have been sliding in use and continue to slide. Even use of anabolic steroids, which had been climbing for several years, in 2002 leveled off for teens.

These positive trends may have a surprising cause. According to Dr. Lloyd Johnston of the *2002 Monitoring the Future* study, “I think it quite possible that the tragedy of 9/11 had something of a sobering affect on the country’s young people. Maybe it helped some, at least, to clarify what is and is not important to them.”

Prescription drugs, such as the painkillers Oxycontin and Vicodin, is the only class of drugs that is climbing in misuse by middle-school and high school teens. Oxycontin had annual use rates in 2002 of 1 percent, 3 percent, and 4 percent in 8th, 10th, and 12th-grades, respectively.

Tobacco

Cigarette smoking for middle- and high school students is at its lowest rates in a decade. Only 11 percent of 8th graders are current (past month) smokers, about half the rate of five years ago, while of 10th graders, 18 percent currently smoke—representing the largest single year drop (from 21 percent) in at least a decade. About 27 percent of 12th grade seniors are current smokers, vs. 30 percent in 2001. Only 57 percent of seniors had ever even tried smoking, whereas 75 percent did in the peak year of 1978.

Alcohol

In all three grades, there were sizable drops in the proportion of students saying that they had touched alcohol at all in the past year or past month. Current (past month) 8th grade drinkers fell from 26 percent to 20 percent; likewise, 10th graders who drank in the past month fell from 39 percent to 35 percent. While the percentage of students who say they got drunk in the past year is still worrisome—

7 percent (8th graders), 18 percent (10th graders) and 30 percent (seniors)—these rates are all down between 1 and 4 percentage points from 2001. Even binge drinking (downing five drinks in a row in the last two weeks), a scourge at colleges, is at its lowest rate in a quarter-century for high school seniors: 29 percent do it (the peak year for high school bingeing was 1981—41 percent did it then).

Marijuana

Marijuana use has declined in all grades. Most encouraging is that for the youngest group studied—8th graders—those who tried it once in the past year (14.6 percent) were significantly fewer than the recent peak (18.3 percent in 1996. About 30 percent of 10th graders have tried marijuana in the past year (down from a 35 percent peak in 1997) and 36 percent of seniors (down from the 1997 peak of 39 percent).

Other illicit drugs

Over the past year, illicit drug use other than marijuana also fell for 8th and 10th graders, though seniors remained unchanged: 9 percent, 16 percent, and 21 percent, respectively. LSD has declined sharply and significantly in all three grades in 2002, as have other hallucinogens, as well as inhalants (a 40 percent drop in annual use for 8th graders, for example, since 1995).

Increased rates in the late nineties of teen use of heroin, crack cocaine, and steroids are now flat, if not falling.

Trouble spots

Although boys use illicit drugs more than girls, more girls are misusing psychotherapeutics (prescription drugs). Though rates are relatively low, these are powerfully addictive narcotics. Also, this dangerous practice is spreading among adults. From 1999 to 2001, the number of people of all age groups who used Oxycontin for nonmedical reasons quadrupled (from 221,000 to 957,000).

Hospital emergency room cocaine cases increased 10 percent and marijuana cases increased 15 percent from 2000 to 2001. Thus while teen drug use is down, it appears the number of young adults risking heavier doses and addiction is up, especially with marijuana.

Sources: *Monitoring the Future 2002*, the University of Michigan, 2003, www.monitoringthefuture.org. *Results from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, Vol. I, Summary of National Findings*, SAMHSA, 2002, www.samhsa.gov/oas/nhsda.htm. *The Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) Survey*, SAMHSA, 2001.

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